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Article

'You Can't Say That!': Critical Thinking, Identity Politics, and the Social Work Academy

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed an eruption of what have been termed culture wars, often converging around the messier aspects of interpersonal relationships and corresponding identity issues that are complex, sensitive, and contested. These are emotive topics that are often colonised by activist groups, and consequently have become enveloped in particular regimes of truth and assertive identity politics. They are often also, by their nature, the kind of issues that are central to social work practice. This can lead to pressure on social workers and social work students to think that these orthodoxies ought to underpin and define the profession, which in turn can lead to the silencing of alternative opinions and the closing down of dissent. This article seeks to locate identity politics in a political and cultural context. It goes on to set out classic arguments for free speech, viewpoint diversity, and for the need for social work to embrace and engage with such. It explores the notion that the closing down of debate about contentious issues, the disincentives that exist to expressing controversial opinions, and the uncritical adoption of ideological orthodoxies work against the development of the critical thinking skills that are essential for social work practice.

Keywords: critical thinking; identity politics; academic freedom; free speech; victimhood; anti-discriminatory practice

1. Introduction

We write this article as social work academics concerned about threats to free speech in the social work academy and in increasingly managerial and regulated practice contexts. The particular prompt for writing stems from the experience of one of the authors (Mark) who, at different points, has been subject to negative professional and press attention for questioning dominant narratives of historical abuse in residential child care. The views that elicit such negative coverage are based on extensive personal and academic experience and are published, largely, in peer-reviewed journals [1–4]. Indeed, questioning the construction of historical abuse narratives resonates with emerging international research [5–7]. It assumes a particular currency and necessity in the UK in the wake of the conviction in 2019 of Carl Beech [8] for perverting the course of justice in respect of false allegations made against a series of public figures. The Beech case destabilises current public and criminal justice policy around the default position of 'believing' those claiming to be victims of abuse, and highlights the need to be able to question such dictums, regardless of the contemporary cultural potency they have come to assume.

The reaction to Mark's published views provides a particular illumination of the cultures of the social work and child-care establishments when confronted with any view that might question orthodoxies around child abuse. It is an experience shared by others who have sought to ask such questions. Sikes [9], for instance, found herself in what she calls the eye of a storm of criticism and hostile publicity for seeking to problematise schoolteacher/pupil relationships, while Sikes and

Piper [10] discuss the difficulties they encountered from a university ethics committee in seeking approval for research into false allegations made against teachers. One reviewer admitted that he could not countenance approving a proposal that did not take for granted the truth of any allegation of abuse made by a child. The Beech case, *inter alia*, highlights the reality of false allegations and the consequences of these for those who are subject to them. These are issues that, in the interests of natural and social justice, academics—and indeed, social workers—ought to be concerned about.

Concerns about the implications of questioning the basis of abuse claims are set against a backdrop of wider disquiet experienced by the authors as to how to prepare students to negotiate contested identity issues in an increasingly regulated and foreclosing professional context. While the social work academy has previously engaged with questions of identity and identity politics [11,12], these sorties have been overtaken by recent cultural shifts, which highlight the threat posed to free speech and to viewpoint diversity by revivalist outbreaks of identity politics [13]. In this article, we seek to re-engage social work with debates around identity in the light of these cultural shifts. Our argument is that to practise ethically and effectively requires that social workers need to be aware of and to engage with identity politics and not fall back on default positions that they may feel pressured or socialised to adopt in respect of what is the right thing to say or do in particular circumstances. Rather, they ought to approach complex social issues with a critical spirit, recognising that there are rarely easy answers and around which a variety of positions might be taken.

The article covers a lot of ground and, as a result, does so with a broad brush, identifying rather than always elaborating many of the ideas presented. Some of the connections made are at this point speculative and themselves open to question; the intention is to outline current cultural trends and to suggest their relevance to social work. The article begins by locating identity politics in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and how these have since morphed from concerns around structural disadvantage affecting major societal groupings to the expression of a myriad of personal and minority group identity claims. We suggest that identity politics are compatible with a neoliberal worldview and its focus on individualism rather than on society. They also create victims among those who feel their particular identity positions are not respected, and this culture of victimhood has deleterious implications for erstwhile assumptions of the importance of free speech. We go on to re-state classical assertions of the need and justification for free speech and academic freedom. We argue that free speech is a prerequisite for critical thinking, a skill that is consistently called for in social work education, but which is often lacking in academic engagement and in professional practice. We conclude by asserting the need for social work academics to engage with and to engage their students in a range of heterodox ideas where contentious and difficult issues can be freely debated.

2. Background

Fukuyama [14] suggests that the subject of modern identity politics was born from the 1960s struggles of marginalised groups for equality and dignity, and the idea that, even when laws were changed, “the psychological burdens of discrimination, prejudice, disrespect or simple invisibility remained ingrained in social consciousness”. Echoing Furedi’s [15] critique of therapy culture, Fukuyama identifies the merging of those ideas with institutions that had absorbed the central idea that raising self-esteem was intrinsic to well-being, culminating in a fight for the recognition of inner worth based on group identity. A key development in the identity politics movement is described as follows:

Each marginalized group . . . could demand that society treat its members identically to the way that the dominant groups in society were treated, or it could assert a separate identity for its members and demand respect for them as *different* from the mainstream society. Over time the latter strategy tended to win out. [15]

This led to the notion that each group’s ‘difference’ meant that outsiders could not appreciate nor understand their unique experiential history and ‘lived experience’.

The manifestations of this focus on identity are increasingly apparent in febrile conflicts between the (new) left and the (alt) right, and are amplified by social media. These are played out on a number of different fronts: in universities (particularly but not exclusively American at this point), we witness shout-outs, no-platforming, and claims around abusive sexual cultures and oppressive institutional responses to these [16,17]. The 'left' version of such expression has elicited a popular reaction against what is seen as their excessive political correctness, much of which has been channelled through academic commentators such as Jordan Peterson. Peterson speaks out against what he identifies as increasingly foreclosing and stultifying academic and cultural climates, which circumscribe what is and isn't allowed to be said. The polarising nature of such clashes can be discerned politically in developments such as the election of Donald Trump in the US and, in the UK, the Brexit vote, both of which can be framed as a reaction to the power of what is identified as a free-floating liberal elite.

The anger of the populist right, which these developments may act as a proxy for, is more likely the result of free-market economics that have increased competition, leading to economic inequality and relative poverty [18], and have stripped communities of well paid, secure jobs and replaced them with low status, precarious, and poorly paid zero-hour contract work. The stressful effects of loss of status and increasing inequality have, of course, been well documented [19,20]. The situation is exacerbated when people must compete for scarce resources and therefore blame those they are competing against, which is often, in the current climate, immigrants. To voice their concerns means that they are immediately, in the orthodoxy of identity politics, called 'racist' and further disenfranchised from legitimate political debate. This cultural and existential angst in which erstwhile centres of authority or legitimacy no longer hold means that the ensuing social conflict is visceral, with little room for compromise or common ground.

The culture wars are also fought out on an epistemological front. Traditional conceptions of knowledge are increasingly deconstructed and argued to derive from and to reflect the interests of privileged social groupings, generally those of white males and correspondingly, to fail to accommodate other knowledges and particularly those that derive from 'lived experience'. This latter knowledge source is particularly relevant to professions such as social work, where there is a recognition of multiple sources of knowledge, including that which comes from experience and a desire to include lived and co-constructed knowledge within its canon. Of course, knowledge is rarely neutral, and to imagine it to be so can mask power imbalances in its construction and utilisation. Post-structuralist and feminist perspectives, rightly, draw attention to knowledge's relationship with dominant power structures and the need to deconstruct these to recognise the condition and advance the rights of traditionally oppressed groups. On the other hand, the movement to question traditional power and knowledge structures has in many instances allowed this process to degenerate into mere solipsism, which denies any valid ground for understanding beyond that of personal experience and diminishes the need for facts or for questioning or critique.

Identifying the destructive nature of the tendency to portray what might previously had been identified as legitimate debate, in the terminology of war, Bruno Latour, doyen of Science and Technology Studies, bewails the current rush to deconstruction and iconoclasm, asking "What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?" [21]. It is such a critical spirit that we argue ought to be fundamental to social work, but which is under threat from a focus on identity politics but also from managerial and regulatory structures and cultures that seek to circumscribe what social workers might say (and perhaps even think). Our concern, as social work academics, is that the profession is largely unaware of and insufficiently engaged with the ramifications of these major cultural disruptions. Yet, the nature of social work places it at the centre of some of the issues these movements converge around.

Foremost among these issues are the views expressed by groups that reflect particular waves or interpretations of feminist thinking—currently what might be identified as fourth-wave feminism. This seeks to identify interlocking and intersectional aspects of female domination within patriarchal systems. Social work has historically and rightly been influenced by feminist thinking. Thus, in

thinking they are being feminist, social work students and social workers can be pushed to adopt fourth-wave positions on domestic abuse, for instance, and to unquestioningly accept notions of patriarchy or coercive control [22] and wholly unconvincing notions that this latter construct can only operate in the direction of male oppression of women. Without going into the detail in this article, such assertions are empirically, conceptually, and ethically problematic. Moreover, by promoting recourse to punishing offenders (or perpetrators as the language goes), such doctrines contribute to punitive and carceral responses to social problems [23]. In fact, understanding domestic violence as simply a manifestation of the patriarchy is as reductionist and one-dimensional as blaming Muslim neighbours for the lack of good jobs in a decaying community [24]. Yet, current positions become reduced to a standpoint assertion—"It's feminist because I say so!"—which diminishes the depth and sophistication of feminist thinking and what it can offer to social analysis and what it has offered to social work [25]. Our position is that both the identity politics of the left, some of which might be thought to resonate with social work values, and the right, which are at odds with them, stifle good thinking and understanding.

3. Neoliberalism and Identity Politics

The kind of identity politics outlined above sit comfortably within a neoliberal worldview, the expression of which might be traced back the elections of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US. The political movements these elections represented fractured the post-war consensus of embedded liberalism or social democracy characterised by a system of governmental restraint and regulation, which kept corporate and business excesses in check and allowed for areas of life to be considered beyond the reach of the market (health and social care, for example) [26]. This political norm was supplanted by neoliberalism, which embraces free market economics, removes regulation and restraint, and opens up civic life to the creation of markets [18]. Economically, it re-distributes wealth in favour of the rich, increasing economic inequality and poverty [27].

This political shift to the right failed to provoke a broad-based economic or class-based analysis or response from the political left, even whilst "the major factors influencing the human condition ... across the world remain grounded in poverty and breaches of human rights" [28]. The response that did emerge was a version of identity politics which, in many respects, reframed understandings of social justice away from structural and collective concerns towards a focus on validating the identities of minorities. The resultant identity politics, as Lilla [13] says "became the *de facto* creed of two generations of liberal politicians, professors, schoolteachers, journalists, movement activists" [13], as well as officials of the Democratic Party in the US and the Labour Party in the UK. Social justice became reduced to "a pseudo-politics of self-regard and increasingly narrow and exclusionary self-definition that is now cultivated in our colleges and universities" [13]. While clothed in progressive credentials, a predominant focus on identity is not, in fact, radical or liberatory, but may also reflect the narcissism [29] and individualism [13] of neoliberal worldviews.

Michaels [30] suggests that while the response to problems caused by economic inequality requires that we do something about it, the solution to differences based on diversity is to celebrate those differences. A politics of the self fails to look for connections between people in embracing the common aim of a better society, and provides "an intellectual patina to radical individualism" [13]. The current fixation with identity has come to exhaust political discourse, marginalising issues of class, the economy, and the common good. Without an economic lens, the fight for social justice is anchored in issues of racial, gender, and sexual diversity, allowing the capitalist project to march on uncontested [31]. It has produced a generation of those who may claim liberal and progressive credentials that are "narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined groups" [32], resulting in a politics that demands rights shorn of any corresponding obligations placed upon its citizens.

4. Identity Politics and a Victimhood Narrative

In contemporary culture, rather than engage with competing or unpopular ideas through a civil and progressive exchange, as envisaged in classical Enlightenment thought [33–35], ideas themselves have become suspect, recast as microaggressions if they are deemed to question or offend a particularly held fast belief. By this way of thinking, speech alone becomes a form of violence or hatred, and has to be closed down. Schulman [36] observes a shift in how the word “abuse” is deployed to shut down dissent and evade the work of negotiation and repair in the course of everyday human conflicts.

This state of affairs results in what Campbell and Manning [17] identify as a victimhood culture. This has academic implications; for some, the mission of universities has been redefined, moving away from critiquing and advancing knowledge towards promoting the claims of particular identity groups. In this context, opinions that might be at odds with a person’s own account of themselves are amplified to ‘hate’ (phobia) of the group the person belongs to, and concomitant calls for protection from said ‘hate’ and the harm that might be said to result.

Arguably, such protectiveness helps nobody, least of all those who would wish to be protected from views they do not like. It does not prepare students for the real-life situations they will have to face as they enter the working world. It certainly does not prepare them for social work, where personal slights and value clashes are everyday occurrences. Moreover, it is not good for students’ mental health, encouraging them to operate in states of anxiety verging on depression [37,38]. So, while protecting them from words and ideas that may or may not cause some kind of emotional discomfort is only a momentary solution, in the long run, it actually harms the students and, ultimately, the profession they enter into. This susceptibility to ‘harm’ is psychologically compatible with thinking in terms of victim identity. Žižek [39], in one of his many critiques of identity politics, notes that for one’s voice to gain authority in contemporary culture, one has to legitimize oneself as being some kind of victim of power. However, defining problems in terms of victimhood or vulnerability can act to repackage structural issues as individual ones in need of therapeutic rather than political interventions [40]. For example, Kipnis [16] objects to what has become the dominant feminist position regarding women’s vulnerability, especially when applied to female students on university campuses. She challenges the view of women as passive, without desire or agency and objects, to the view of men as sexual predators and in need of control or education. This identity politics type of feminism, again, allows structural and economic barriers to women’s agency to go unrecognised, obscured behind agendas of vulnerability and protection.

As well as masking structural inequalities, the claim to speak from a particular identity position, often forwarded by self-appointed protectors of the non-powerful in academia and in civil society, is calculated to assert the moral superiority of that identity and to inhibit questions. Debate is now reduced to whoever has “invoked the morally superior identity and expressed the most outrage at being questioned” [13].

5. The Case for Free Speech and Threats to It

The current difficulties in the academy in raising certain issues leads us to a reassertion of the need for free speech. The kind of critical thinking required to negotiate complex social (work) issues demands it—it requires permission to step outwith the consensus, to take risks, and to move beyond established frames of reference [41]. While arguments for free speech can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks, the classical liberal position on it derives from the work of J.S. Mill [42], who presumed against the state’s right to prescribe what people are allowed to say or hear; there ought to exist, he stated, “the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered”. The only limitation Mill conceded to free speech was to prevent harm to others. His conception of harm was of a risk to bodily security or public order. In fact, his defence of free speech presupposed that some views might be considered unpalatable—offence was not a defence against the right to free speech.

Mill saw critical thinking as a bulwark against state tyranny. He considered lack of critical thought, or “holding fast to something”—a “common-sense” belief in an ideology or “truth” in terms of conformity. He railed against the mediocre conformism, increasingly evident in civic society that is capable of “enslaving the soul itself” [43]. Moreover, according to Mill, those who seek to silence dissenters do themselves an injustice. They should welcome debate; if they are confident in their arguments, they ought to allow their possible refutation as this process of contradicting and disproving one’s opinion “is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action” [42]. Arendt [44] reinforced this argument in her censure of those beset by the “mere habit of holding fast to something. Much more reliable”, she argued, “will be the doubters and skeptics, not because skepticism is good or doubting wholesome, but because they are used to examine things and to make up their own minds” [44].

It can be difficult to stand against conformism in contemporary culture, amplified as it is through social media; once a critical mass of people uncritically follow perceived wisdom or “common sense” around any particular issue, then questioning that narrative becomes risky in respect to adverse publicity and reputational damage. For example, Dreger [45] outlines her experiences as a researcher and activist of becoming embroiled in the sexual politics of transgender individuals and groups. She used that experience as a springboard to seek out other academics who had researched topics related to human identity and who had been vilified for their findings, discovering “a whole fraternity of beleaguered and bandaged academics who had produced scholarship offensive to one identity group or another and who had consequently been the subject of various forms of shout-down” [45] (p. 108). Other recent examples include Hill [46], who explored the controversial subject of greater male than female variability in IQ, inevitably meaning that there are more men represented in the very high echelons of IQ tests, but also more in the very low categories (there is no difference in mean IQ). Although the same trend can be seen in other studies (for example, Deary et al. [47] found the same in their analysis of over 80,000 Scottish children who took an IQ test, aged 11, in 1932), Hill’s analysis was so unpalatable that academic scandal and controversy ensued culminating in the rejection of the paper, after acceptance, and the actual removal of the paper from another online journal after being published. A more recent example is Lisa Littman’s study, which found social media and peer pressure contribute significantly to gender dysphoria among young girls. Once again, the article was removed from the university web site due to a backlash from the trans community [48].

A further example of negative reactions to non-conforming ideas is evident in the phenomenon of ‘no-platforming’. This has spread to the UK from the USA, a prominent example being when feminist writer Germaine Greer was ‘no-platformed’ at Cardiff University for her views on transsexual women. The expressed justification was that Greer’s views constituted hate speech [49], when in actuality, Greer was simply questioning the basis for self-identity. Can calling yourself a woman be sufficient to actually be a woman even in the face of biological evidence to the contrary? If the answer to that is ‘yes’, then the consequences for scientific discourse and epistemologies of facts and knowledge are profound.

The closing down of non-conformist speech and exploration of those consequences, on the basis of protection from ‘hate’, has led to a culture of what Lukianoff and Haidt [37] identify as “vindictive protectiveness”, with deleterious implications for free inquiry. In fact, inquiry itself becomes redundant, because activists “believe they possess the full truth already” [17]. In short, the above are consequences of the epistemological wars pointed to earlier. Where research findings are in contradiction to a group or a group representative’s “lived experience” and beliefs, reactions can be powerful. Such is the adoption of the orthodoxies by the institutions of contemporary society, that dissenting research voices can be silenced and potentially new and illuminating information removed from public access or indeed scrutiny.

6. Critical Thinking in the University: Academic Freedom

The rights to freedom of thought and speech espoused by Mill and the dangers of conformity highlighted by Arendt provide a compelling justification for the doctrine of academic freedom. This was recognised in law in the UK in the 1988 Education Reform Act. More recent legislation in Scotland, the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 (26 (4), confers “freedom within the law to: hold and express opinions, question and test established ideas or received wisdom, develop and advance new ideas or innovative proposals, and present controversial or unpopular points of view”. However, the scope for universities to adhere to such principles can be compromised by political and civic cultures that would seek to limit it. In Mark’s case, a tweet in response to his university’s statement of support for academic freedom suggested that this was all very well but . . . this seems to be the position of swathes of civil society to viewpoints that challenge received positions on matters of identity.

Yet, there are good reasons why universities might seek to safeguard and not to qualify academic freedom. Williams asserts that free speech is at the heart of the idea of a university, being integral to its “collective enterprise to critique and advance knowledge” [50]. It renders knowledge provisional and contingent and subject to change in light of shifting circumstances, thus offering the prospect of paradigm shifts, when the weight of evidence for new ways of thinking begins to tip the balance away from erstwhile, outdated and unhelpful forms of knowledge [51].

While there should be few restrictions to the kind of ideas one might hold and argue, in reality, and in practice, we would recognise some bounds. Indeed, Mill [42], himself, while recognising the primacy of free speech, is predisposed against gratuitous offence. As social work academics, we would wish views to be expressed responsibly and sensitively and to contribute towards some social good. The essence of free speech is that we open up our views to others in what Habermas [35] identifies as the public sphere, which accommodates a multiplicity of viewpoints. Houston [52] introduces a further dimension to applying Habermas’ discourse ethics by suggesting that these can be complemented by an orientation that draws on Honneth’s [53] concept of recognition. Indeed, Honneth’s concept of recognition is a quality that would seem to be consistent with most social workers’ values. However, these considerations are not an obstacle to or an argument against free speech, but rather offer pointers as to how we might exercise that right ethically, and so that it might have positive effect.

So, what constitutes knowledge and what is or isn’t allowed to be said should not merely reflect the ‘held-fast’ views of activist or establishment groups. When arguments are well grounded and soundly constructed, and where they highlight and might offer possible alternative solutions to wicked social problems, we have a duty as academics to surface them. Failing to do so teaches students to stick to the “language rules” [44] whilst not critically thinking about the complexity of human experience. Merely sticking to the “language rules” in social work practice may be understandable in an increasingly regulated professional landscape, but it does not make for good social work.

7. Identity Politics and Social Work

There are particular features of social work that make its alignment with the worst excesses of identity politics possible. For example, the anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) movement, which emerged in the early 1990s, in practical expression, focussed primarily on discrimination at personal and declaratory rather than structural levels [12]. This resonated with identity politics thinking from a relatively early stage in the development of social work knowledge. Through such a lens, social injustice was perceived as a problem of “cultural injustice” rather than of economic inequality. Therefore, it followed that cultural recognition should be the remedy [12]. This meant that social work was well positioned to absorb the increasing domination of identity politics, their political orthodoxies, and their emphasis on “lived experience”. Garrett [54] points out that “keywords, such as ‘difference’, ‘diversity’, and ‘multiculturalism’ are malleable and can be *put to work* for forces which represent—in the broadest terms—the political left or right”. Nevertheless, this focus on diversity became entrenched in social work under the mantra of “valuing difference” [55].

The identity of the abused care leaver is one that social work has valorised. It is rooted in personal experience or the interpretation thereof, but is also one that has been co-opted because of its political currency by particular individuals and advocacy groups. Thus, it has assumed a cultural potency in recent years. Nevertheless, its emotional appeal should not exempt it from academic critique. An aspect of Mark's own experience involved tweets from care leaver advocates stating that the only response to narratives of abuse was "I believe you". This is problematic, ethically and intellectually, as the Beech trial highlights, but also because while narrative approaches to research hold an understandable appeal in social work, they should not be employed at the expense of proper analysis or different interpretation [56,57].

Furthermore, social work is increasingly concerned with protection agendas, which were already explored in terms of women earlier [16], and the management and fear of risk [58]. The shift from helping families in difficulty to protecting children from risk, with parents often redefined as risk factors, has been well documented [59,60], and has led to the casting of children and young people as always in need of protection and/or of being subject to long-lasting harm. Questioning that orthodoxy has become almost impossible in the current climate.

The implications of this state of affairs for social work are addressed by Webb [11]. Picking up on the Axel Honneth/Nancy Fraser debate around the respective social and structural claims for recognition and redistribution, Webb identifies with Fraser's [61] argument that claims for cultural recognition are "serving less to supplement, complicate, and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them" [61]. Webb's own position is clear: he argues that the "ethical predilection based on recognition of the Other in terms of diversity and 'the right to difference' should be simply abandoned" [62] (p. 309). We would not go so far as Webb in dismissing ideas of recognition, and certainly not the version articulated by Honneth, but do agree on the need for this to be located within a redistributive political frame. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that social work has lost further ground in achieving the balance between recognition and redistribution. Fenton [63], for example, found that the newest generation of social work students appear to have internalised a neoliberal ethos of individualism—recognising individual 'rights' to identity while expressing punitive attitudes to the poor, unemployed and 'undeserving'.

McLaughlin suggests that these attitudinal tendencies can lead to:

Social workers demonstrating their 'anti-oppressive' credentials by admonishing the asylum seeker for using sexist language, while at the same time refusing them services, or taking their children from them, because they are not considered 'one of us'. [64] (p. 56)

Another consequence of adopting an identity-based political viewpoint alongside a punitive attitude to poor or unemployed people is that social work risks dismissing and cutting itself off from the people it works with and their worldviews and concerns that may not reflect the 'taken for granted' identity views of a social (work) elite (see, for example, Hochschild's [65] evocative ethnography of a Trump supporting community in Louisiana). A further example is given in Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell's [24] exploration of the rise of English nationalism in northern England. The over-riding feelings of the interviewees, who were members of the English Defence League, were anti-immigration and anti-Muslim, alongside a profound hatred of the liberal left who were viewed as having abandoned traditional working class communities that had been devastated by de-industrialisation and austerity, and focussing instead on giving support to, and promoting the rights of, different identity groups. Simply reacting with disapproval to the racist language/attitudes of the people in those communities, while having no critical understanding of the economic forces that have brought about grim circumstances for them means that understanding and relationship-building, which are core to social work, will be extremely difficult.

So, a preoccupation with identity politics among social work students means that in order to 'be' anti-discriminatory, the ideological positions adopted by activist groups are often accepted as the 'correct' position to take, as ADP is put to work for certain ideological positions as well as for

neoliberalism. Students who differ from that ideological positioning can find themselves keeping quiet in class and not taking part in debate [66]. This is unsurprising, given the consequences for students who might disagree with the orthodoxy. For example, Felix Ngole was removed from his social work programme (in a finding later overturned) for expressing reservations about same-sex marriage on Facebook [67,68]. His view was in keeping with his values as a Christian, and he insisted he would not treat people any differently, and yet articulating his belief was enough to remove his right to practice.

8. Critical Thinking in Social Work

Paradoxically, while prevailing managerial climates and adherence to particular identity-based ‘truths’ inhibit critical thinking, the skill is currently recognised in educational and professional discourse as being an essential one. Various regulatory and qualifications frameworks determine that practitioners ought to be able “to gather, analyse, critically evaluate and use information”, and “to use research, reasoning and problem solving skills to determine appropriate actions” [69] and to “critically identify, define, conceptualise, and analyse complex/professional level problems and issues” [70]. The framework for honours degree courses states that social workers should be able to “critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution” [71].

In setting out these requirements, these bodies are merely reflecting what the literature on learning and teaching in higher education says about the nature of “graduateness” [72]. Graduates ought to understand and balance how ideas relate to one another. By Masters level, they should operate at a level of extended abstract thinking where they can theorise, hypothesise, reflect, and generally play with ideas [73]. Such qualities are claimed to prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future [74].

The core disposition to be acquired through higher education and one which, according to Barnett [75], is fundamental to moral commitment and social engagement, is a capacity to cope with epistemological uncertainty and complexity, which, together, he suggests, result in an existential experience of ‘strangeness’. Increasingly, the literature on professional formation identifies the importance of the Aristotelean intellectual virtue of practical reasoning, which involves critical thinking but also the development of a certain kind of person, one “disposed towards questioning and criticizing for the sake of more informed and responsible engagement” [76] (xvi). Qualities of critical reasoning are especially important in social work where workers are daily confronted with issues where there are no formulaic or easy answers [77]. Properly, then, most social work programmes list ‘critical thinking’ as an explicit learning outcome.

However, Sheppard et al.’s [78] study of 12 social work programmes in England and Wales suggests that they do not achieve this. Whilst finding that social work graduands scored more highly than a UK population normative sample on interpersonal characteristics such as insight and altruism, the researchers also found that they scored significantly lower than the normative sample on assertiveness and on critical thinking, with approximately one-third of the sample scoring very poorly on critical thinking tests. These findings add weight to a previous study [79], which demonstrated that although interpersonal skills were predictive of success or failure on social work programmes, critical thinking skills were not.

At one level, Sheppard et al.’s findings may reflect an historical resistance in UK social work to theory and good thinking [25,80]. At a more personal level, social workers are exhorted, and are likely to be predisposed to be empathetic. Yet, Bloom [81] argues that empathy is a poor moral guide, and that decisions guided by it may have deleterious consequences. He proposes instead what he calls rational compassion, which requires critical thinking. This historical resistance towards ideas and dispositional orientation among social workers towards empathetic engagement is compounded in more recent years by what Houston identifies as the “iron cage of regulation” within which “ethics have been conflated with rules, procedures, codes of practice and standards” [52] (p. 1288). Whittaker and Reimer [82] provide some evidence for this from their research, which found that, when reflecting

on an ethical dilemma, social work students were motivated, primarily, to comply with rules and procedures. Fazzi [83] also found that social work students in Italy were less imaginative and creative in their responses to social work problems after their programme of study than before it. They had, in effect, learned codified and standard responses.

Whilst this paper does not suggest that this situation is solely a result of ideological orthodoxies and social work's adherence to them, it does make the point that such adherence contributes significantly to the lack of thinking and debate necessary to develop critical thinking skills. When these results are taken together with findings from Twenge [84] and al-Gharbi [85], who found that young people and students were more censorious of free speech than previous generations and felt that people had to be "protected from offence at all costs" [83] (p. 258), then a picture begins to emerge where students may find it easy to stick to approved tropes or language rules, which mean they do not have to think too deeply or critically about issues and where they can rest assured that they are not causing offence. In the light of Sheppard et al.'s findings about lack of assertiveness, the attraction of those tropes is even more apparent.

In summary, contemporary society confronts us with disincentives to good thinking, including increasing regulation, standardisation, and the pressure not to offend imposed by the rise of particular identity group orthodoxies, which foreground the interests of particular groupings and contribute to a closing down of debate on key areas of relevance to social work. These disincentives may be felt particularly acutely in the field of social work due to increasing regulation and traits in the new generation of social workers, including weak critical thinking skills, weak assertiveness skills, and a desire to protect people from offence as paramount [63].

9. Conclusions

It is our position that the social work profession and academy, in order to (co-)produce critical thinkers among its graduates and practitioners, cannot fail to engage with contentious issues—these are the profession's bread and butter. Contention, in the contemporary world, increasingly converges around issues of identity and victimhood. In social work, such issues often come to the fore around matters of sexuality and domestic and sexual violence, present and past, all framed within a protective metanarrative. However emotive such subjects are, a variety of lenses needs to be brought to bear on them, not to minimise or excuse wrongdoing, but to illuminate their inevitable ambiguity and complexity. It is only in so doing that we have any chance of maintaining an ethical stance and improving practice.

Currently, single, orthodox 'truths' that are driven by activist groups and compatible with neoliberal individualism dominate and subsume that ambiguity and complexity. These orthodoxies and the serious consequences of deviating from them, social work's framing of anti-discriminatory practice, censorship, and self-censorship combine to create a mix wherein critical thinking can be discouraged, and students learn the 'correct' things to believe and the 'correct' language rules.

Although it is acknowledged that social work practitioners in the current regulatory climate, must, for reasons of self-preservation rather than ethics, take care to abide by behavioural codes, whilst they are students, they should be encouraged to honestly share and explore opinions. It is only in this way that opinions can be challenged, discussed, critically considered and, perhaps, sometimes changed, and that the resultant critical spirit might filter through into practice. This is especially pertinent at a time when social work education is attracting students from increasingly diverse backgrounds with a corresponding diversity of views, as exemplified in the Ngole case (see [66]). The profession cannot respond to complex social and cultural issues merely by reciting politically correct orthodoxies, claiming that these reflect the kind of reductionist values embodied in professional body's codes or repeating the mantras of activist groups on questions of identity; instead, it needs to engage with the ontological, intellectual, and ethical issues raised by heterodox viewpoints.

All of this has implications for the kind of learning and teaching strategies that might be employed in preparing social workers to be critical thinkers and to be comfortable in the 'strangeness' that might

be their experience in encountering a range of views different from their own. Lea and Stierer [86] argue for the need to teach the conflicts in any particular discipline. In social work, this would involve questioning current doxa around, for instance, domestic violence and historical abuse, to help students realise that there are legitimate counter-arguments to dominant ones.

Kreber [70] identifies the need for pedagogies that provoke students to critically reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and values so that they might move beyond frames of reference that limit how they make meaning of their experiences. Moreover, teaching ought to require and encourage students to take risks, take a stance, and ‘go public’ with their knowledge claims, subjecting these, willingly, to the critical scrutiny of others [70]. For students to dare do so, academics, in turn, need to be supported to model such risk-taking through going public on matters of concern, which can be viewed as heretical in ideological orthodox cultures that seek to close down legitimate debate.

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